

Politics aimed at participation: A critical analysis of role of civil society and women groups affecting peace in Afghanistan

 Quhramaana Kakar is a leading figure in Afghanistan working for women's empowerment. She has served as the Gender Advisor for the Afghanistan Peace and Reconciliation Program, an advisor to UN-IOM, and the Deputy Chief of Party on a higher education development program funded by USAID. She founded the organization "Women for Peace and Democracy", which works within Afghanistan as well as with Afghan refugees and Diaspora.

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Many Afghans, and the international community, reckon the inclusion of civil society and women in the political processes of Afghanistan as crucial for the success of the ongoing peace talks. Paffenholz and Spurk, while emphasizing on the importance of civil society's role in peace building, state "There is also agreement that non-governmental peace initiatives are as needed as official or unofficial diplomatic efforts." Effective participation of civil society at the political level in the peace process in Afghanistan has been a challenge throughout. Women's role as civil society actors has been influenced in a number of ways by the prevailing uncertain political environment and actors involved. The political dependency of women on various fronts – individuals and groups with political ambitions, ethnic affiliations, and external factors such as the agenda of strategic depth of regional powers in Afghanistan, has led Afghan women in directions that may not necessarily guarantee protection of women's rights during or after the peace process. This is reflected, for example, in the recent **feeble stance** of women in the Afghan parliament on protecting the law of Elimination of Violence against Women, which lends support to the argument that female politicians are too focused on maintaining their political positions. Such a focus is understandable given the context of women's political positions and their reliance on their political associates, who are often conservatives / traditionalists, and the most at risk group in the current peace process and possible peace deal with insurgent groups are women. Although women's groups strive to secure the required independence and impartiality in the peace process and to reflect the interests of Afghan men and women, unfortunately, their formal roles in the peace processes have not always been outlined by women or women's rights proponents alone – they have typically been shaped by other factors.

Acknowledging the substantial improvement in their participation and inclusion in the social and political system over the last 12 years, it is noteworthy that historically, women have been the **primary victims of war and insecurity in the country**. The broad involvement of the international community in their direct **support to women's groups as well as individual women**, placing pressure on the Afghan government and political groups to include women, has been indispensable in this matter. However, the presence of a number woman in the system has not had the larger impact that was expected; their engagement has not brought about significant improvements in the lives of the most vulnerable groups of women. One of the major causes has been the absence of a united platform made up of women's groups and wider civil society, working towards sharing their collective concerns and including the needs of women who do not have access to political participation.

In order to secure inclusion in the processes, some individual women and women's organizations are forced to associate with redundant and fragile politics, some of them promoting, intentionally or unintentionally, the militant agenda of warlords and ultra-conservative elements – those who do not believe in women or human rights in

the first place . This frequently has negative implications, both for individuals and organizations, and those who are associated with them.

The traditional concept of civil society in Afghanistan is different to its modern definition. There is even a difference in the definition and understanding of civil society from region to region – from urban to rural contexts. Some civil society organizations in Afghanistan promote certain political parties, groups and individuals. This deviation from the role of independent civil society results in yet lesser trust, and this is primarily the case with traditional civil society in Afghanistan. This is well argued by Cohen and Arato, who state

The political role of civil society in turn is not directly related to the control or conquest of power but the generation of influence through the life of democratic associations and unconstrained discussion in the cultural public sphere [1].

Association of the afore mentioned civil society with political parties undermines their legitimacy.

Often, some of the notable civil society organizations do not represent the wider range of civil activities in the country but merely represent a given group of Afghans who have similar understanding of the so called modern terms of what civil society should be. On the other hand, there are a number of informal but organized civil society groups at the grassroots level which may not be as visible; however, their contribution is often more sustainable. Their sustainability originates from the embedded concepts of civil society in their communities, based at the core of their respective identities. These civil society groups play a vital role in promoting or otherwise maintaining peaceful co-existence at the local levels. However most of their efforts are fulfilling political requirements of individuals in their communities, Riphenburg [2] explains how ethnically based civil society associations contribute to present day political affairs in the country, and the ways in which the absence of true civil society and democratic governance leads to violence or instability.

Prior to the period from the communist take-over in 1978, most of the informal civil society groups were more responsible and accountable to the people and communities they represented. The last three decades of war and the rise of warlordism in the country had an adverse impact, corrupting the existing civil society. This led many such organizations to opt for the accomplishment of self-interest versus the interest of their people, predominantly for the sake of survival. As a consequence, peace, popular representation and human rights – values which should otherwise exist at the core of these informal civil society groups, became secondary concerns.

It is important to analyze the shift of Afghan civil society organizations to political groups. Historically, traditional groups and civil society members emerged against various regimes as politically neutral movements but ended up as political groups. Their unaccountable conversion has mostly resulted in the escalation of a range of problems in the country. Individuals who gained power through standing against the Russian occupation of Afghanistan included religious leaders, tribal elders, students and teacher unions, and/or those who were not necessarily directly involved in the politics or the political structure of the country. However, they have endured the history of the foulest years of atrocities against human rights of the Afghan people – women and men. Women who were closely associated to individual warlords were supporters of their struggle against foreign invasion, but they were often unaware of some of the practices of fighters during and after their struggle against the Russian invasion, and during the civil war. As argued by Harpviken, Strand and Ask

In times of crisis, Islamic networks have taken on key functions either in the form of legitimizing resistance, or through forming the backbone of resistance. [3]

The definition of “Talib”, in Afghanistan and in the region is defined as someone who seeks religious education and lives in peace, helping people and volunteering in social activities. Upon their indulgence in politics, soon this civil group ended up being known as a terrorist network inside Afghanistan and the wider world.

The current informal structures of civil society in the country are highly influenced by power brokers at the local levels. Their role in peace-building depends on the mutually supportive relationship of power holders in the country. Having said this, although women have been playing an important role in the war and peace situations of the country, sadly very little is documented and hardly any historical evidence is available in support of their taking part in peace building efforts in the Afghan society, such as influencing attitudes and taking part directly in the various processes. New gender identities are being created and reconstituted through discourses that emerge from the current peace processes; and more research is needed into new ways of producing and re-reproducing the cultural capital of civil society in the country.

[1] Cohen.J.L and A. Arato, 1994, *Civil society and political theory*, Cambridge, MA: p.10,

[2] J. Riphpenburg, Ethnicity and Civil Society in the Contemporary Afghanistan, **Vol. 59, No. 1, Winter, 2005**

[3] Harpviken, Strand and Ask, 2002, *Afghanistan and Civil Society*’, paper commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available online [here](#).

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